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AUTHOR Smitter, Roger
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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the ethos-centered crusade in which the evangelist, not a doctrine or a political/social issue, becomes the reason the audience attends to the message. The paper analyses how the Billy Graham crusades fit this definition--the fame of the evangelist extends beyond any individual crusade, the message preached by the evangelist becomes the highlight of each meeting, and the evangelist's credibility provides the dominant persuasive force. The paper also argues that the emergence of the Billy Graham campaign coincided with a unique set of events which shaped his communication style and suggests that it is unlikely that another evangelist will arise to continue the Graham style of the ethos-centered crusade because of new channels of communication and more specialized audiences. (Sixteen references are attached.) (KEH)

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THE LIMITED FUTURE OF THE ETHOS-CENTERED EVANGELISTIC CRUSADE

Dr. Roger Smitter
Associate Professor
Speech Communication & Theatre Department
North Central College
Naperville, IL 60566

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INTRODUCTION

The most famous evangelist of this century has said:

> "It's become so that it's a full time job just being Billy Graham, even if I don't preach a single sermon or attend any organizational meetings" (Frady, 1979, p. 371).

Graham's statement is perhaps the best indicator that his evangelistic efforts are a prime example of an ethos centered crusade. This paper will define such a crusade as one in which the evangelist him or herself is the central focus. The evangelist, not a doctrine or a political/social issue, becomes the reason the audience attends to the message. The evangelist has a fame which extends beyond any individual crusade. The highlight of each meeting is the message preached by the evangelist. The crusade in all of its forms is closely identified with the evangelist. In an ethos centered crusade, the speaker's credibility provides the dominant persuasive force.

The paper will examine how the Graham crusades fit this definition. The paper will also argue that the emergence of the Billy Graham campaign coincided with a unique set of events which shaped his communication style. Finally, the paper will suggest that it is unlikely that another evangelist will arise to continue the Graham style of the ethos-centered crusade.

THE GRAHAM ETHOS

It should be clear to even the casual observer that Graham is one of the best known public speakers of this century. Graham has the credentials to establish himself as a dominant spokesperson for Protestantism in the world. He has preached to an estimated 100 million people in over 65 countries and witnessed over 2 million conversions (Christianity Today, 1988). These credentials led one religious writer to call Graham the "patriarch of American Protestantism" (Buursma, 1985, p. 23). Graham was considered in 1974 the one evangelist with sufficient clout to call for an international conference on evangelism (Pollock, 1979, p. 174). Biographer Frady (1979) notes that while Graham's message is often a dire one about the human condition, Graham himself is often seen apart from that message as a attractive and likable person (p. 124).

Further evidence of the ethos-centered crusade can be found in the multi-million dollar organization (with over 500 employees) which bears his name: The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. It provides the organizational expertise for staging evangelistic campaigns by Graham and several other evangelists. By virtue of the name, the association invokes the speaking credentials of Graham. Pollack's (1979) laudatory biography of Graham notes that Graham alone decides which of the hundreds of requests for city-wide crusades he will honor (p. 111). Marshall Frady (1979), writing a more critical biography,

saya that Graham is in essence the evangelistic association (p. 375).

Graham's ethos is most clearly felt when he preaches. In the Prologue to his book, Frady (1979) captures much of this ethos in a literate and penetrating description of the Graham presence in the 1973 Raleigh, North Carolina crusade. Space limits allow for only a sliver of Frady's description. For example, just before he speaks, the audience is asked to bow their heads in prayer as the choir sings its final hymn. Then says Frady:

> When everyone then lifts his head...he is discovered suddenly and simply delivered onto the stage down between them. All over the stadium there is a myriad glimmering of binoculars. Among the evening's platform gallery of miscellaneous notables--a lieutenant governor, a football coach, a vaguely famed television songstress--he sits composed and motionless, his hands folded formally over the Bible in his lap, his long thin legs elegantly crossed and his theatrical luxuriously maned Viking countenance lifted just a little in musing abstraction into the middle air....(p. 6).

Frady also describes Graham's physical presence on stage:

> Tall and preened in a shimmerous dark suit, even now at middle age he still has that look of some blond, gallant, crystal-eyed prince out of a Nordic fairy tale.....(p. 5)

Frady moves from descriptions to an analysis of the Graham ethos:

> He has endured. Since his first exuberant emergence back in those brave sunny simplicities of American right after victory in World War Two, he has somehow kept imperviously preserved through all the attrition and abrasions of the years....that chaste glamour of Sunday morning sanctity. It has been a phenomenon not without its mysteries. An

> affable and vibrantly ordinary farm boy out of the bland midlands of North Carolina, suddenly glaring it seemed out of nowhere, Billy Graham has abided ever since as a folk totem-figure, virtually a mythic eminence, in the popular life of the nation: the icon, the breathing bodied image of the native American rectitude (pp. 11-12).

Clearly Graham has outlasted all those who predicted his simple message would exhaust itself in short order. He has become the "'high chaplain' of American culture" (Frady, p. 13). As one Baptist minister is quoted as saying: "To most church going folks in this country, Billy Graham has become nothing less than the nearest thing to Jesus on the earth. He's sort of like Christ's American son." (Frady, p. 14).

Part of the Graham ethos seems to be his overwhelming simplicity and affability many audiences. One evangelist who was an early contemporary, recalls Graham's ability to quiet a particularly hostile college audience early in the preaching career:

> '...just his simple likability had the whole audience lapping out of the palm of his hand in no time at all. It was the transparency of his spirit, I think. Here was a guy with absolutely no guile, no pretenses or defenses at all. Just this tremendous, endearing sincerity and goodwill, and his simple yearning for lost souls.' (Frady, 1979, pp. 162-163).

Frady notes Graham's "natural large generosity of heart and spirit" (p. 223). A Graham associate, in commenting on his simple style, said "Billy just has this God-given ability to disarm." (Frady, p. 223).

Another dimension of his credibility is his apparently unbounded enthusiasm for preaching and indeed any project. Anyone who has ever seen Graham preach can attest to his energy level. Frady notes that this energy has been with him all of his life (1979, p. 60 & p. 91).

In summing up Billy Graham, Frady says "He constitutes finally the apotheosis of the American Innocence itself--that plain, cheerful, rigorous, ferociously wholesome earnestness...." (p. 15). It is clear that Graham is seen both by his followers and by those who observe his message from afar as a credible source. He is clearly dynamic and energetic in both his preaching style and, until recently, his travel schedule. He is seen as trustworthy, pure and simple. He is seen as a spokesperson for evangelism and for Protestantism in America and in international circles.

HISTORY OF THE GRAHAM CRUSADES

Frady notes that prior to the Los Angeles crusade of 1949, Graham was "just another spirited but obscure young gospel slinger among all the other free lance evangelists battling back and forth with their ragamuffin tents over the land" (p. 191). What followed, was, as they say, "history." A unique blend of national and international events plus the emergence of new communication technology would shape Graham's message and the audience's perception of the message in a way that is not likely to be repeated in contemporary society.

As Frady and others (see Leonard, 1983) have noted, Graham's preaching represents one turn in a recurring, 40 year cycle of outpourings of American evangelistic fervor. These revivals occur during a relatively calm period of American history following a major upheaval of catastrophic importance. During these times, the American society caught its breath only to face a new set of challenges. For example, Moody's evangelism took hold in the post-Civil War period when the country began to redefine itself as an industrialized society. Billy Sunday's preaching flourished in the Roaring 20's, following the upheaval of WW1 (Leonard, 1985, p. 575).

A number of cultural trends nurtured the emergence of Graham's message. The post WW2 era was marked by a significant boom in church attendance (Leonard, p. 574). Others have pointed to the general American exuberance which marked the winning of the war (Carpenter, 1985, p. 44). Graham's acheived his initial fame in evangelistic circles by preaching a "mixture of religious and patriotic pentacostalism" in his work with the fledging Youth for Christ movement in the late 1940's (Frady, p. 161; see also Carpenter, 1985, p. 44). An pro-American, patriotric tone would mark much of his early preaching and thereby attracted the attention of Hearst (Frady, 1979, p. 161).

It is noteworthy that Graham's theme for the Los Angeles crusade of 1949 was "Christ for the Crisis." It captured the tricky tension between the post war American exuberance and the growing sense of foreboding. Some of the complications raised by

the peace were emerging (Frady, 1979, p. 222). America was beginning to find a new form of "Americanism". Just before the beginning of the crusade, the Russians had announced that they had the secrets for making the atomic bomb.

The war years and the ensuring economic boom produced a new way of life in America. An old way was fast disappearing. Graham's innocence and wholesomeness found a ready audience. Says Leonard (1983), "In a religiously pluralistic state, filled with innumerable sects and preachers, perhaps it is natural, even necessary, that one person should symbolize national religion and public virtue (p. 575). Years after the Los Angeles crusade, Graham would admit that his early preaching came close to identifying the American way of life with the Kingdom of God. "In Graham, the man and the moment had truly met," says Frady (p. 222).

The particular demands of the youthful audiences Graham faced in his early preaching played a significant role in the emerging crusade communication strategies. He and his associates constantly looked for communication channels which would capture the attention of the youth audience. An early quote from Graham exemplifies his willingness to use any method possible which would confront others with the gospel: "We can use every modern means to catch the attention of the unconverted--then punch them right between the eyes with the gospel" (p. 160). One of Graham's public relations people would say:

> In our crusades and work, we need
> every instrument of modern mass

> communication. We've got the greatest produce in the world to sell--salvation for men's souls through Christ. Why shouldn't we sell it as effectively as we promote a bar of soap? (Frady, 1979, pp. 287-288).

The analogue of sales and evangelism was hardly original with Graham of course. What was new for both evangelists (and advertisers) was the powerful medium of television, which would provide a good fit for Graham's message. **Christianity Today**, a major journal of evangelistic thought, credits advertising executive Walter Bennet with pushing Graham into the television age. The journal goes so far as to claim that Bennet's foresight in the early 50's to put Graham on television was as significant in his rise to prominence as was the famous Hearst memo to his reporters. Frady (1979) says that Graham's rise to prominence came at a time when America was adopting to the mass myth of Nielsen: "that the more widely and spectacularly an appearance manages to take in the popular eye, the more real and consequential it is" (p. 222).

Frady further helps explain the particular Graham appeal on television. Following WW2, Americans realize the nation's power and its limits. The religious leaders available for national consumption via television were Bishop Sheen, who gave "chatty TV unctions," and the Protestant Good Humor Man, Norman Vincent Peale. But, "the definitive figure of this particular renaissance of the American righteousness was to be Billy Graham" (p. 213). Frady continues:

> Like all the others before him, Graham

> came forth with a voice that seemed to conquer and order that new chaos in the American experience. 'He preaches the life of certitude,' reported one religious analyst of the time. 'There are no doubts, no real choices to be made, no expanses of experience where right and wrong, the nourishing and the corrupting, the healing and the killed, cannot be easily distinguished.' Thus he addressed the complications, nuances, qualifications: The Bible says, ye must be born again! (Frady, 1979, p. 214).

Graham's message of simple salvation was ideally suited for the emerging mass medium of television. The medium tends to reduce complexity to simplicity. It focuses on personalities, not issues. It teaches the audience to have a short attention span and thus look for simple answers. While Graham and his associates clearly had no knowledge of what the ensuing years of research would reveal about the nature of the mass media message, they did realize that it worked very well to generate decisions for Christ. It also worked to make the message every bit as important to the crusade as the message.

Almost any writer, friendly or skeptical, who speaks of Graham says that his message is consistently simple (Frady, 1979, p. 13; Pollock, 1979). Graham does not dispute this. In an interview with Christianity Today, Graham laid out what he considered to be the essence of effective preaching: the message is to be marked by simplicity, repetition, and urgency (to generate a decision), the evangelist is to be portray a holy life (to be a role model), to show love (even in the face of

rejection) and a social concern (p. 31). Aside from these simple rules, Graham offers little in the way of advice for effective preaching. He says his power comes from the Holy Spirit, not his own efforts (Christianity Today, 1988, p. 18).

Former Christianity Today editor, Carl Henry, who in many ways was the intellectual force behind the evangelistic movement, has characterized Graham's message as having an irreducible theological content. Graham, says Henry, was a proclaimer of the evangelical doctrine, not a shaper of it (Henry, 1988, p. 17).

Critics have been swift to point out that the Graham message oversimplifies, making the complexities of sin and redemption too often a matter of mere black and white. Religious commentators focusing on his early New York City crusade in 1957 said that the message preached "propagated a pious simplicity that flattened the true dimensions of good and evil in life and impoverished all the true possibilities of human character and struggle" (Frady, 1979, p. 308).

It is clear that Graham emerged on the American and then international scene at a time which was ripe for his type of evangelistic message. Social and cultural factors fostered the promulgation not only of his message but of his image, his ethos. New forms of mass communication seemed to be especially adept at spreading a simple message presented by a charismatic preacher.

THE FUTURE OF THE ETHOS CENTERED CRUSADE

Can another Billy Graham arise? Perhaps more important to ask is whether another ethos-centered crusader in any form will appear on the American scene. This paper has presented a considerable amount of information about Graham to set the stage for an answer. Perhaps first it would be wise to turn to the speculations of religious writer Bill Leonard (1983) who laid out the job requirements for the next Billy Graham: be a male, be evangelical in preaching style and theology, be loosely connected to a major denomination, demonstrate that fervor is more important than theological orthodoxy, be sufficiently ecumenical to be comfortable in the company of Catholics and Jews and know how to use the media (p. 575). Perhaps the most significant job requirement is the following statement from Leonard: "As national chaplain, he must articulate, even personify, those broad moral, spiritual and patriotic attributes which help define the American myth" (p. 575).

Can these attributes be captured in an individual today as readily as they were in Graham in the late 1940's? Leonard goes on to speculate that American society may give birth to multiple "American chaplains" for multiple audiences in a pluralistic society. In this speculation lies the answer to the question this paper has been so long in coming to.

Graham's message worked well in its time and place to bring him to prominence. But, Graham's simple message has been heard

by many people. Its televised form is no longer new. The crusader style is becoming outdated. The channels of communication still carry such simple messages but now there are so many more channels available. The mass rally has clearly been replaced by the cozy TV room, where viewers watch chatty interviews with Christian celebrities. It is noteworthy that the best known religious figures of the day (even before their scandals) were not seen as evangelists in the Graham mode but TV personalities or talk show hosts. The considerable public scandal over many of the TV evangelists will be forgotten as new figures rise to take their place. Their simple messages will be suited for a more seasoned TV audience than Graham faced in his early days. These preachers will appeal to more specialized audiences watching on cable systems or exclusively religious stations. Their goal will be to find a particular, not a mass audience. The audience will most likely be made up of like minded persons, not the great mass of "unsaved" souls Graham preached to. The ethos of these television evangelists will be different than the one Graham cultivated. Part of the audience's attraction will be to the medium as well as the speaker and the message.

The public still sees crisis to be met. But, these are personal crisis, most often involved with economic issues of survival or a quest for a posh life-style. The Graham-type message of "Christ for the Crisis" is not likely to find a sympathetic ear. The public tends not to look to individuals to

personify the American values. The fall from grace of the many evangelists further cements the distrust the populace shows in public officials of all kinds. An interest in persons of power and prestige (the heros of the society) has been replaced by an interest in personalities, especially those who deviate from the norm. Despite all of the criticism of Graham's message, there has never been any question of his personal life, marital faithfulness or financial accountability. Such credentials are necessary for a national chaplin--but are unlikely to establish a person's fame in the current social climate.

Another religious commentator, Richard Pierard, writing in the Reformed Journal reports attending a Graham crusade in Washington, D.C.: "What I experienced was a sense of deja vu. I had seen all this before" (p. 3). Pierard tells of his response when asked, several days after the crusade, who would succeed Graham:

> My response was 'nobody.' The times simply have changed. With the advent of religious television, the proliferation of parachurch ministries, and the revitalization of local congregations, there is no real possibility that someone will pick up Graham's mantle after he is carried off in the heavenly chariot. Even for strongly committed Christians, the mass ritual in our society is now sports, not great evangelistic rallies. (p. 3)

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